

FrontLine

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Management Associations
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Annual Meeting Edition

This edition of FrontLine presents a summary of the National Council of Social Security Management Associations (NCSSMA) annual meeting prefaced by the written version of the NC President's Annual report delivered at this meeting. We wrap this edition up with a couple of editorials and some bits and pieces.

President's Annual Report

1999 – 2000

By Steve Korn

I believe it was Shakespeare who said, "What's past is prologue." That being the case, with this past year as prologue, the coming year promises to be a great one. I can say without hesitation that it has been very satisfying for me personally to have lead this great organization over the past year. And when I look back at the events of the past year, I believe we have accomplished a great deal. Here is a look at some of our accomplishments:

- **Improved Communications within DCO:** One of our key objectives this year was to work more effectively with DCO so we could assume a stronger role in policy development. Towards this end we have been included in additional workgroups and forums. We improved the format and tenor of our tri-annual meetings with DCO executives, and we established informal links between NCSSMA committee chairs and DCO staff.
- **Improved Communication with SSA Executives:** We were very successful at opening the lines of communication between NCSSMA and SSA executives. We had several face-to-face meetings with Commissioner Apfel and Deputy Commissioner Halter, and more frequent communication by e-mail and phone. We worked closely with other Deputy Commissioners on several projects, including Paul Barnes and Yvette Jackson.

- **Increased External Influence:** Working with our new Washington Representative Sara Garland, our stature on Capitol Hill moved up a notch as members of the NCSSMA Executive Committee met directly with key members of Congress in addition to key staff. We twice testified before Congress detailing our frontline resource needs. We continued to nurture our relationship with the SSA Advisory Board. And under the leadership of Immediate Past President Ron Niesing, we significantly increased the effectiveness of our grassroots network.
- **Progress on Classification Equity Issues:** Our greatest accomplishment here was finally getting upgrades for TSC Managers. We were also instrumental in getting Level 1 District Manager criteria issued (albeit more restrictive than we wanted) which also resulted in additional upgrades. And while we did not get our former Class I District Managers upgraded to GS-15, we did see increased understanding and continuing attention to this issue.
- **Influence on Vision 2010:** While many elements within this Vision will continue to be defined, we were successful in insuring that the Vision strongly endorses the future of community based service, provides clients the choice as to how to interface with SSA, and provides for full integration of field offices into the 800#, internet, etc.
- **Influence on Operational Policies:** Among our successes was the decision to allow IRIB applicants the choice to mail the application to their local office, to postpone the nonagenarian workload pending receipt of adequate resources and Medicare interface, to expand IVT to all offices, and to change the dates for the PE inventory.
- **Debut of FrontLine:** This online publication, which replaced MASS Media, allows us to reach more readers, more quickly, and more frequently at significantly lower costs.

It is important to note that all of the above accomplishments were the result of a true team effort, not only by members of the Executive Committee, but by all of our members, whether they participated on a committee or on a workgroup, provided comments and opinions, or simply supported the rest of us. I look forward to even greater accomplishments this next year.

31st Annual Meeting - Seattle, WA - October 17-19, 2000

By Phil Walton

Detailed annual meeting minutes prepared by the NCSSMA Secretary, Toni Russo will be shared through normal association channels. Our purpose here

is not to detail the events, but rather to provide a day to day overview. We'll do this abridged summary as a chronology.

Day One – The day started early with a welcoming breakfast at 7:30 a.m. Eric Riedl, President of the host Northwest Management Association, welcomed all the delegates and introduced the Seattle Deputy Regional Commissioner, Carl Rabun, who likewise extended a warm welcome from the Seattle region.

When the business meeting began, the five former NCSSMA presidents in attendance were recognized: Steve Bauer ('84-'86), Bob Duncan ('88-'90), Mary Chatel ('93-'95), Don Seatter ('95-'97) and Ron Niesing ('97-'99). The internal business meeting consisted of the formal seating/introduction of the delegates, a review of the rules for the annual meeting, approval of the minutes from the prior year's annual meeting, the membership and treasurer's report and, finally, the President's Annual Report.

Then our keynote speaker, Commissioner Ken Apfel, addressed the delegates. He covered a wide range of issues, too wide to detail here. Members will get all the details in the formal minutes. However, we should note how heartfelt Commissioner Apfel's remarks were regarding his mixed emotions as he prepares to leave SSA for a teaching position at the University of Texas. He spoke of the institutional history that SSA employees possess. More importantly, he spoke to the institutional "heart" of SSA employees. Mr. Apfel characterized the SSA workforce as unique in the pervasiveness and depth of their concern about public service. Even when we disagree among ourselves, it's clear all parties maintain a focus on what's best for the American public.

At the close of the Commissioner's remarks, he joined Steve Korn, NCSSMA President in presenting this year's NCSSMA Community Service Award to Jane Roalkvan, Assistant District Manager, Green Bay, WI. The extent of Jane's involvement in the Green Bay community is indeed impressive.

The meeting then returned to the internal business format. The nomination of officers, review of by-laws proposals, audit report, proposed 2001 budget and the first reading of the resolutions made up the agenda.

Our other headquarters speaker was up next. Paul Barnes, Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources, spoke to a good many issues, some currently in place and several coming down the pike. As always Mr. Barnes covered the waterfront of HR issues in a way that kept everyone in the room listening.

The last speaker of the day was Sara Garland, NCSSMA Government Affairs Representative. Sara reviewed current legislative initiatives and upcoming issues. Sara's yearlong affiliation has been a very productive one and she has clearly been a quick study and a strong advocate when it comes to NCSSMA concerns.

Day Two

The day opened with a return to internal business with the second reading, discussion and voting on proposed resolutions. You may find this odd, but this part of the meeting is my personal favorite. Since the delegates come from across the U.S. and have widely diverse experiences and therefore perspectives, the discussion is lively, productive and instructive. After listening to six delegates take the floor and express their opinions, crafting the final resolution can be a real stunt. Fortunately the management associations throughout the country are populated with stunt men and women.

At 8:30 a.m. John Rynne , President of the New England SSMA, rose to call for a moment of silence for the sailors lost on the USS Cole. John pointed out that his timing coincided with the memorial ceremony being conducted in Norfolk, VA.

In mid morning Carmen Keller, Regional Commissioner, Seattle addressed the meeting. Ms. Keller was serving in a dual capacity. She welcomed us to the Seattle as the RC and she was representing the Deputy Commissioner of Operations (DCO). She expressed DCO's gratitude to the field for the workload accomplishments of the past year. Ms. Keller discussed many topics of current interest. Delegates appreciated her candid style of presentation and clear connection to the frontline issues.

After lunch we broke into two groups and participated in interactive workshops. The first topic was the Legislative Workshop moderated by Ron Niesing and Sara Garland. The second workshop was Recruitment and

Retention: Current Trends, which was led by Jacqueline Armbrorst and Patrick Murray of Watson Wyatt Worldwide, Inc. Both sessions provided an excellent opportunity to interact with subject matter experts.

Late in the afternoon, the candidates' forum allowed all the nominees for national office to present their views. Then Steve Korn fielded questions as the incumbent president seeking re-election. The topics ranged from upgrades, the role of the NCSSMA in the 2010 vision, and initiatives for the future.

The day wrapped up with more than an hour of continued debate on resolutions. After hours the delegates attended a banquet. The Joseph P. Collins award, the highest honor bestowed by the NCCSMA, was presented to Ron Buffaloe, Salisbury, NC. Ron was recognized for his service as president of the Atlanta Region Management Association, his activities as chair of the NC automation committee and his extensive work on the NCSSMA web site, including acting as its web master.

Day Three

The day began as the prior day ended, discussing and voting on resolutions. Resolutions passed at the annual meeting establish the priorities and determine direction for the NCSSMA for the coming year. A copy of the final resolutions will be posted on our web site at www.ncssma.org.

With the resolution work complete, an open discussion of current issues was conducted under the heading of new business. Rick Warsinskey, District Manager, Cleveland Downtown, OH spoke about the work of the Staffing Committee that he chairs. Rick reviewed the staffing survey results and fielded questions.

Next the election of officers was conducted. The results:

President: Steve Korn, District Manager, Vallejo, CA

Vice President: Tony Pezza, District Manager, Hackensack, NJ

Secretary: Nancy Smolinski, District Manager, Fairfax, VA

Treasurer: Mitchi Weger, District Manager, San Antonio, TX

TSC Representative: Rudy Macias, TSCM, Phoenix, AZ

Steve Korn's acceptance speech highlighted the priorities for the coming year including upgrades for the former Class I managers, a revisiting of the

management ratio in field offices, increasing our membership rolls and improving communication with headquarters.

After the election results were announced, the plans for future national annual meetings were discussed. The Kansas City region will host the 2001 annual meeting in St. Louis, MO from November 5-8, 2001. The 2002 annual meeting will be hosted by the Denver region. The exact location is still pending the completion of bid consideration. Colorado Springs is the first option, Denver is the other.

Final Notes

- A summary of the annual meeting would not be complete without an acknowledgement of the efforts of the NWMA, and its hospitality committee, who made the logistical arrangements for this meeting. Thanks also to the Seattle regional office for the support they provided the NWMA.
- When members read the detailed notes provided by the NCSSMA, they will see the interchange more clearly than is possible in a brief summary here. For our purposes here however I should relate the “hottest” topics that came up repeatedly throughout the meeting. The most frequently heard subjects were: upgrades for the former class I managers and other managers who to date have received no upgrade; service delivery issues, e.g. immediate claims taking, internet claims, etc.; staffing and recruiting concerns; and management-staff ratios.

Editor's Corner

By Phil Walton

TLC Rollout

The Talking & Listening to Customers (TLC) system is in the rollout process. Featured in the most recent edition of the OASIS, the TLC is intended to collect customer comments on service issues. Pilot offices have already begun using the system.

Since “pilots” in SSA are roughly akin to two-minute warnings of national implementation, we know the TLC system will be coming to a FO or TSC

near you (i.e. yours) in the not too distant future. With that in mind, it would serve us well to bear in mind a few of the hesitations that greeted the TLC a few years ago when it was first introduced in its conceptual stage.

First, there is the matter of first impressions. You know what they say about first impressions. They create feelings that can be hard to set aside later. Early on in its development, the TLC went by a different name. It was the Customer Complaint System (CCS). Needless to say, the proposed end-users of the system found this decidedly negative slant objectionable. So, it evolved into the TLC, which still elicits negative comments but also allows for neutral and positive ones as well. We hope that the central office management of the TLC serves to allay, not resurrect these initial negative connotations.

A second concern voiced widely as the TLC made its way from concept to reality was the labor intensity involved. Field office employees will be making inputs to the system as a secondary action to an interview or phone call with the public. We remain concerned that already harried FO & TSC interviewers will not welcome the additional time required, however small. This probable reaction feeds into another, more significant concern---- the validity of the data. If appointments and walk-in interviews and phone calls are stacked up and waiting, there will be a very strong chance that not every appropriate comment will be recorded. If I am the interviewer I may well pick and choose the comments I report. For example, perhaps I have a penchant for compliments for my interviewing style. Or maybe I have a pet peeve about a problem process and may see the TLC as a way to advocate a remedy.

Make no mistake. None of this reflects poorly on the staff. It reflects human nature. If we have a new process that I am supposed to use but I am quite busy with other things, I will only naturally “manage” the number and nature of my inputs. This tendency may well show itself early on as results of the TLC come in. Remember that TLC inputs are purely voluntary --- in effect, it’s an honor system. If skewed results show up, we fear the reaction could well be to make the TLC a compulsory part of all customer transactions. That would be adding cement shoes to work processes already bogging down due to staffing shortages, time constraints and all the rest. Central management should anticipate odd data initially and swear off any draconian solutions.

The final caveat about the TLC voiced early on in its introduction is a very rudimentary one. Field office and TSC staff and management have routinely received and dealt with customer comments for decades. It's simply part of the day. Always has been, always will be. It's what we do.

Any SR or TSR could sit down and produce a list of the top ten customer concerns in 5 minutes or less. So, the natural question arises----- what is the TLC going to tell us we (at the front lines) don't already know? The TLC in this regard could be correlated to the old tongue in cheek definition of a consultant, i.e. someone who borrows your watch to tell you what time it is.

The point is the biggest customer concerns are already painfully well known to virtually everyone. Take one example --- the lack of clarity in notices. This has been an issue since time immemorial. Just a few weeks ago it was the subject of a congressional hearing. Internal and external factors complicate this issue dramatically.

But will the TLC expedite the resolution of such problems or merely automate the tabulation of complaints? If it will enhance the improvement process, just how that will happen needs to be made clear.

So the TLC will collect and therefore highlight customer issues. It will increase a common awareness. But obviously awareness of an issue does not resolve it. Service glitches are very intricate issues and require considerable determination and resources to remedy.

Given the initial reticent reaction to the TLC, our concern remains that the TLC system is not allowed to focus resources on the collection of customer concerns to the point where even fewer resources are left to resolve them. That would not only be the ultimate irony, it would be a grave disservice to the American public.

Savings? Or Shifting Costs?

Conducting entry-level training via interactive video has saved a considerable sum in travel costs. Five millions dollars is the latest figure heard. It may sound like circular logic but there are costs to producing these "savings".

The cost attendant to these savings is paid entirely by field offices in the form of substantially increased mentor time. When these training classes were conducted in a centralized location, the receiving office bore no cost in terms of mentor time for the duration of the class. So this expenditure of staff time is entirely new. And it is substantial. Working with the trainees on “off air” activities and exercises, preparing for the next day’s activities and generally “being there” for the trainee takes a great many hours away from production.

Our point here is this: to accurately calculate the savings created by IVT entry-level training delivery, headquarters needs to subtract the cost field offices are paying. Then the true, net savings would be known. And the overall picture might look substantially different.

Though the jury is still out on long-term results, IVT entry-level training appears to be working. We know one thing for sure --- it’s saving travel money. But service delivery on the frontlines is impacted to create these travel savings. The travel savings from IVT should be shifted directly back to those who are paying the personnel cost to produce them.

Bits and Pieces

- Gauging by the increased traffic, 3000 visitors last month, the NCSSMA web site is steadily becoming what it set out to be --- a readily available home base for members to check for information, pose issues and otherwise interact with the NCSSMA. Check it out at www.ncssma.org.
- With the Combined Federal Campaign upon us remember the Federal Employees Education & Assistance fund. Steve Bauer, former NCSSMA president and SSA District Manager from Minot, North Dakota, is the Executive Director of the FEEA. Founded in 1986 as a coalition of federal management associations and unions, the FEEA has been a worthy cause for years. Steve’s leadership helps ensure that. The CFC agency code for the FEEA is 2808. Check out their web site at www.feea.org.

- Next year's annual meeting will be hosted by the Kansas City Management Association in St. Louis, Missouri on November 5-8, 2001. With the number of members within a day's drive of this central location, the NC would like to see as many members attend as possible.

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